

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH MAJOR GENERAL ROBERT CONE, US. ARMY, COMMANDING GENERAL, COMBINED SECURITY TRANSITION COMMAND-AFGHANISTAN, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 9:30 A.M. EDT DATE: TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Well, I believe we are ready, ready for the Bloggers Roundtable this morning. And with us on the line is Major General Robert Cone, who is the commanding general for the Combined Security Transition Command- Afghanistan, based in Camp Eggers in Kabul, Afghanistan. General, welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable, and thanks for joining us this morning.

GEN. CONE: Well, thank you. It's good to have an opportunity to talk to you all. I think the last time I talked was back in the fall, and we had a number of programs we were getting started on. And I'd like to talk a little bit about where we are today as we get ready. As you know, historically here we've had a -- they call it a fighting season, but in reality -- and once the weather clears, we see an up -- increase in enemy activities. On the Army side, we have had a very productive winter. The Afghan National Army decided to double its production of soldiers over the course of the winter, and that'll give us around about 8,000 soldiers that are out in the training -- beyond the training base and out into the fielded units. So as we finish up this winter, we've got right now about 51,000 in the fielded force and some 10,000 that are in the training base that we'll be getting out to the units here in the next couple of months.

We've fielded now 11 full brigades, and they are located geographically all around Afghanistan. I've just finished a tour around visiting the various corps headquarters, and they are very much attuned to supporting the ISAF campaign plan. They're very excited about that. And they are leading a majority of named operations, which are major operations, in Afghanistan right now. A lot of them are small right now because the season hasn't really started, but we expect them to take a very leading role here in the weeks to come.

We've fielded three of our six commando battalions now, and these are about 650-man units equipped with U.S. equipment and light -- elite light infantry tactics.

And they are doing extremely well. And the first three battalions have acquitted themselves in operations with Special Forces extremely well in their performance and conduct. And it sets an example and tells us what a well-trained Afghan National Army soldier is truly capable of accomplishing.

And we have a fourth battalion right now in training that will be out in another month or so. And we'll continue to build our fifth and sixth.

Equipping continues to improve. A lot of the equipment shortages have come in over the course of the winter. Of course, we continue to field the M16. The first corps -- actually the 205th Corps will be the first in sequence to receive the M16 -- that was a contribution from both the United States and Canada -- and will be receiving M16s at the rate of about 10,000 per month. And we'll equip the Afghan forces through the summer and into the fall.

The first of the up-armored humvees, the latest version, the 1151 version, has begun to arrive from the acquisition sources. And the Afghans will begin driver's training on those very soon.

On the Afghan police side, I think we've made some significant progress in reform. But very candidly, we have a long way to go in terms of reforming the Afghan National Police because, in fact, we started several years later than the army. A major program I talked about last time was a program called Focused District Development that allowed us to really focus our resources on the unit that we think is most important to the Afghan people: local police in the districts. And we began this process of identifying -- the first round had about eight districts in it. They were in some of the toughest neighborhoods in Afghanistan, essential to COMISAF's plan for security for the spring.

We essentially went in and did a unit set fielding, where we took the units -- these police units -- out of the district, brought them back to our regional training center and backfilled them with our best police, the Afghan National Civil Order Police. And for eight weeks they held the fort, actually showed the Afghan people what real professional policing is about, while the local police, in some cases, were found not to be competent enough to go through training. And we continued to recruit, but refilled these districts with nationally vetted leaders, with police of some competence, and then took them through eight weeks of training, gave them full equipment, gave them full access to ID cards, the national payment system for police, and then brought them back out and replaced them in the districts.

And right now we're in the process of assessing their performance.

We leave police mentors on the ground with these folks to make sure that they don't return, perhaps, to -- or they resist the temptations of corruption that perhaps they've seen in the past. Reviews are very good on the first eight districts. We have the second group of districts is now currently in training, and we're in the process of conducting shuras with the local communities of the districts that have been identified for round three.

Overall, we'll do 52 districts in critical areas this year, and those districts are linked to other parts of the rule of law -- for instance, the judicial system, the corrections system -- and then we're also working to link economic development. Once security is established in these districts, they become the face of the government to the Afghan people, security is established, and then all of the other components of reconstruction can begin in these districts.

So we've had a lot of support and a lot of partnership with other entities here, to include the minister of -- Ministry of Rural Reconstruction,

the independent Directorate of Local Governance, all working with us to leverage our program.

With that, I'd like to stop and take your questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Andrew Lubin, you were first on line. Once again I'd like to remind everybody to, when I announce you, to state your full name and your publication. So Andrew, why don't you get us started.

Q General, good evening. Andrew Lubin from the Military Observer. How are you tonight, sir?

GEN. CONE: Very good.

Q General, can you talk to us a bit about the Marine deployments you've got coming out? You had 2/4 MEU come in last month, and 2/7s come out the next few weeks. Are they training, fighting, or are they going to, like in Iraq, do a little of everything?

GEN. CONE: Actually, they're coming out in two groups. The 2/4 MEU will be assigned to ISAF, to General McNeill, and will be located in southern Afghanistan assisting with issues in original Command South, but will be directly working for General McNeill. They will be primarily in a fighting role or reinforcing the RC South forces in their fight in the southern provinces. The 2/7 Marines, coming out of Twentynine Palms, will be assigned to CSTC-A, this command, and their principal responsibility will be for training Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, mostly police.

And what we've done, essentially, is identify a geographical area that has been a particular problem, where we've had problems in the past conducting police training because of the security situation. And frankly, the Marines gives us the muscle that we need to go into those areas, establish the proper security, so that we can conduct the police training in these nine districts.

Many people have looked at where we intend to operate. General McNeill is fairly excited about it. And what we believe is that this fully supports both RC South and RC West, the ISAF effort. But if we can get the kind of police forces that we believe we're capable of or the Marines are capable of, working with professional police trainers, it will be a game-changer in the south in these particular districts that were former Taliban strongholds.

So I think, back to your original -- I think they'll be doing a little of all of things you mention, but the 2/7 will primarily be responsible for police and army training.

Q Great. Thanks very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Doug?

Q Hey, General Cone, this is Doug (Burton ?) from Civilian Irregular Information Defense Group. Focused district development in Nimroz province -- have we done any of this for that province yet?

GEN. CONE: Technically, Delaram will be -- because it's right on the tip there, on the very top -- it's technically in Delaram. We will be doing

that as part of our future efforts. But right now we haven't gotten a lot into Nimroz simply because ISAF isn't into Nimroz yet. As ISAF moves in in the future, and I believe there are plans, I think we'll start to find out what we have in there and get into that area.

Q Okay. Next question: is there anything similar to FDD in the works for the border police?

GEN. CONE: Right now there are a couple of initiatives that are working with the border police. I think after -- initially, FDD to the Afghans seemed a little bit alien. They sort of believed that they could make these changes incrementally. And part of the problem in the past has been that that hadn't really worked as well as everybody would like, particularly because of the corruption that's involved. I think what has happened in the mind's eye of a lot of people, to include the minister of Interior, is he's seen the effect of doing this sort of unit set approach, replacing people, basically doing things like drug testing and taking a hard look at this way to field, and I believe the minister of Interior is interested in doing border police forces in this manner in the future. He's talked to me about it.

Right now our priority, because of the insurgency, is really local policing. But as more resources become available, we will attempt and broaden this program into Afghan border police.

There are some initiatives ongoing right now in focused border police training. But we believe it's going to take a fairly comprehensive approach and maybe changing out some of the key players, maybe recruiting nationally, bringing those people in to change what is effectively an area that is very rife for corruption based upon what they do for a living.

And so I think it's a good fit. It's just a matter of us getting the resources necessary to do it.

Q Okay, sir, one last question: On the subject of auxiliary police, I understand, they're supposed to be phased out in October.

My question is this: Sir, what is the plan to make use of turned Taliban, who were former bad guys and now they've come and seen the light? (Inaudible.) We want to make use of them. Is there something in the works to do that?

GEN. CONE: Yes, there is. And in fact, it's called the -- it's the PTS program. And I'm not sure what that acronym stands for, but it basically is an Afghan-led program that reforms former Taliban, basically looks at their individual case.

They come forward. The Afghan government decides what would be the appropriate requirements for them to fully transition, declare their support for the government. And then they are brought back onboard as full citizens in Afghanistan.

That program is under way. It is not significant in terms of the numbers. But there have been numbers, a good number of people, that have been involved in this. The number escapes me right now off the top of my head, but it's out there.

I think, on the Afghan national auxiliary police, Afghanistan has struggled with this problem of warring tribes and warlords; this problem, as you know, going back to the defeat of the Soviets, and then the warlords being present in the country.

The Afghans have a major program called the disarmament of illegally armed groups that works very hard to disarm the tribes and cause them to declare their allegiance to the national government and to rely upon the rule of law in Afghanistan, to solve problems, and not have armed tribes.

The Afghan national auxiliary program about two years ago was an attempt to arm the tribes again in Afghanistan. And what we saw was the effect of paying people essentially to do -- to support us when we needed them and stay home. Although it initially had a very positive impact, over time it essentially degraded to really the effect of arming people who not -- were not necessarily in alliance with the government. And their corruption became rampant, and that's the reason that we have disassembled them.

We are now in the process of taking people who are in the Afghan National Auxiliary Police that are truly worthy, that are -- that can -- that have positive recommendations from their tribes, that have a good record of service, and transitioning them to the Afghan National Police and doing away with the Afghan Auxiliary Police. And I think that is because that is what the Afghans wanted and shows us over time, in a country like this that's had such a problem with armed groups, what can happen to these sanctioned armed groups.

MR. HOLT: Okay. David?

Q General, hi. It's David Axe with War Is Boring. A question about mobility for the ANA: in light of Afghanistan's geography, how are these units going to move around to get where they need to be in time to make a difference?

GEN. CONE: Yeah, there's a couple of initiatives that are working. The most -- the one that we're most excited about is the stand-up of the air mobility squadrons, the Mi-17s. And one of the things that we've done that's a sort of a change in strategy is to recognize we've got about 160 Mi-17 pilots that are actually not bad. Many of them are older gentlemen who flew for the Soviets but are still qualified to fly Mi-17s. We've changed our investment strategy and through donations and purchases increased the number of Mi-17s that we have.

And for instance, last month the Afghans flew over -- or the first 15 days of this month have flown some 90 sorties, moved over 4,000 of their -- or correction -- over 1,200 of their -- or 2,200 of their folks. So there will be about 4,400 over the month -- flown them and then about 2,800 kilograms of cargo.

What our plan is, is that we'll deploy at least four of these helicopters out in each of the core areas adjacent to where these commando battalions that I talked about were fielded. And then, for a rapid reaction force, they will have the ability to move, via Mi-17, a commando platoon on the ground very quickly to reinforce a police district that may be being overrun, et cetera.

I think our intent, as we get more and more helicopters, and as we get more and more AN-32s and AN-26s, will be to provide greater air mobility for

them. It's a great system. It works very well in this country, and the Afghans have a pretty good safety record with the Mi- 17s.

On the ground, it's -- of course, this is a difficult country to get around in. Their primary mover is a light tactical vehicle -- it's actually a Ford Ranger pickup truck -- and an International Harvester medium truck. We've seen some pretty good advances with the Afghans on maintenance with those. And of course, as I talked about earlier, the up-armor humvee that we're putting into service -- we've got about 500 of those on the ground of the previous model, and now, with the 1151 here, we'll put about 5,000 in place for the ANA. And that will give them some protected mobility for survivability of the IED.

Now we are in a -- we do -- we recognize the IED has increased here in Afghanistan, and we are also working with the Afghans in terms of route clearance companies. We're building them EOD detachments and then providing them, as I say, the protected mobility necessary, although we all know, I think, that the best way to defeat an IED is to never let it get out on the road and to use the intelligence, attacking the network using the intelligence of the Afghan people to round up these bomb-makers before they ever get out on the road. And the Afghans are very good at that.

Working with their national director of security, which is essentially its intelligence service, they do a pretty good job of finding and defeating IEDs before they're in fact detonated.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And Richard Miller.

Q Hello, General. Richard Miller from Talk Radio News. Sir, I look forward actually to visiting you sometime next month, when I'll be over.

General, my question is a very, very general one. Most of our audiences are, of course, familiar with the Iraq war and its tactics and sort of the episodic nature of the violence there, which, as you just described with IEDs, can come in that form. By contrast, the Afghan effort speaks in terms of a spring offensive which every year about this time is widely expected. I'm wondering if you could comment on how enemy tactics differ between Iraq and Afghanistan, and what exactly is meant by spring offensive. What are you looking for and hopefully hope to avoid or defeat?

GEN. CONE: Yeah, I think the problem here -- as you know, this is a very harsh winter here in Afghanistan. And frankly, not a lot happens when there's a lot of snow on the ground and temperatures are freezing. And to conduct an insurgency in this environment is extremely difficult, particularly when you don't have the benefit of the sorts of winter weather and cold weather gear that we have that allows us to continue our operations.

So what you normally see -- and if the Taliban were to go to ground and congregate, then they likely could be found by friendly forces. So typically they will migrate out of the country to secure havens to spend the winter and then move back in. That is simply what's meant.

I am not aware of any -- last year there was a lot of discussion about a big offensive, and we had a lot of intelligence that the Taliban were going to come aggressively after us. There was even talk of Kandahar falling, et cetera.

None of that happened, largely due to the preemptive nature that ISAF took to the fight.

In this spring, we talked simply about an offensive -- actually, it's our offensive that we're about to launch to go after the enemy. That would be misleading. Because -- because of the cold-weather gear that we have, because of the intelligence that we have, ISAF has stayed after this enemy all winter long.

And what we're really trying to assess right now is, how disrupted has the enemy potentially been, and whether he is beginning to start to migrate back into the country or migrate from whatever safe havens you might have to a more population centers, where he might execute his activities.

But there will be invariably, just because of how hard it is to do business here in the winter time, an increase in enemy activity in the summer time, simply because that's the only time they can really -- when the weather is good, that they can conduct a larger number of events. And so we fully expect to see an increase in the number of events.

The second point I would make is that this year, we probably have 30,000 more troops in the Afghan army than we did a year ago. I know, and again probably some number less than that is out, because some of those are logisticians, and some of them are still in the training base, but some number of increase, a significant number, perhaps 15 (thousand) to 20,000, out looking for the bad guys.

So you might look at the number of increased activity on the enemy and say, oh, they're combat actions. And people go, oh, my god, it's getting worse, when in reality, it's the Afghans out looking in dark places for bad guys and stirring up the enemy, who may not have chosen to start the fight this early in the season.

So there's a lot of factors that play into this. I am very optimistic about the contribution of the Afghan national security forces this year versus last year.

To your question about differing tactics between Iraq and Afghanistan, the Taliban has always been, or the enemy here in Afghanistan has always been, more likely to want to stand and fight. And they prefer, for cultural reasons, that they conduct operations, offensive operations, that they'll congregate and attempt to stand and fight against Western or Afghan forces.

I think, over time, they've learned that it's not very productive to do that against Western forces, NATO forces, certainly U.S. forces. But it's also not very productive to do that against Afghan army forces. And what we're hoping to do through our training programs is get to a point where the kinds of exchange ratios that they face, even dealing with police, because of the training that they've had, will not be in their favor. And so they won't seek to do that.

And I think what we've seen is a shift in tactics. As we become more effective at training the army and the police and there's more confident warfighters on the battlefield, they've shifted their tactics to the asymmetric attack, which is the IED or the suicide bomber. And for instance, here in Kabul we see a lot more suicide bombers than IEDs because, frankly, the population is supportive of the people. It would be very difficult to get an IED here, to do

the prep work without being detected. So, normally what happens is it's a car bomb that comes into town attempting to target a coalition or Afghan national security force target or suicide bomber that has a vest on, simply because it's very difficult for them to operate here in an environment that is supportive of the Afghan government.

Q And General, thank you for that. One last, quick follow-up. And that is, I wonder if you'd comment on reports that the Taliban or al Qaeda has essentially taken control of South Waziristan, where they've always had a presence, of course, but now that that may impact on the spring offensive coming up?

GEN. CONE: I really couldn't comment on that. I'm not aware of a discussion. I know that there are organizations and agencies that monitor that very closely. It is always a concern of ours in regards to the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the potential that we have, of course, for forces to transit that, as you understand, the Pashtun belt, that sort of (wind and ?) cross between Afghanistan and Pakistan. And again, Task Force 82 during its time here has worked very hard along those routes in trying to reduce that traffic, but that has been a tactic, technique and procedure that we've seen in the past, so therefore it is likely that we will see it again.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Just got a few more minutes left. Has anybody got any follow-ups? (No response.)

All right. General Cone, thank you very much for joining us today. General -- Major General Robert Cone, the commanding general for the Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan.

And sir, do you have any closing comments for us?

GEN. CONE: Well, as I said, we're very excited. We remain convinced that Afghans really have a will to fight and defend their country. And we believe that the best solution here in Afghanistan involves developing Afghan security forces that are right for Afghanistan and are capable of doing what they've done for the last 5,000 years, which is defending their country. And I believe that investment in the Afghan forces, in training and equipment and time is -- rewards itself because of the fact that the Afghans now are at a point where they will be taking the fight to the enemy.

And again, when I put 16 trainers out in a battalion of 650 Afghans, think of the potential there, if we can get these Afghans to a fighting capability at least, you know, similar to a Western force, what the payoff is for those 16 trainers in getting those 650 Afghans in the fight. It's an exponential reward, and I think we are very optimistic about what we're going to see this summer and fall as the Afghans really start to realize their full capabilities.

Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, sir. Thanks for joining us for the Bloggers Roundtable today, and we look forward to talking with you again.

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